

Research Update is published by the Butler Center for Research to share significant scientific findings from the field of addiction treatment research.

RESEARCHUPDATE

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Treatment Outcomes Among Youth

The number of youth entering treatment for alcohol and/or drug dependence is increasing. In 2000, the latest year for which data are available, over 134,000 youth under the age of 18 were admitted to alcohol and drug treatment facilities in the U.S.¹ As more young people need treatment, attention has turned toward measuring and improving treatment effectiveness for this population.

Does Treatment for Youth Work?

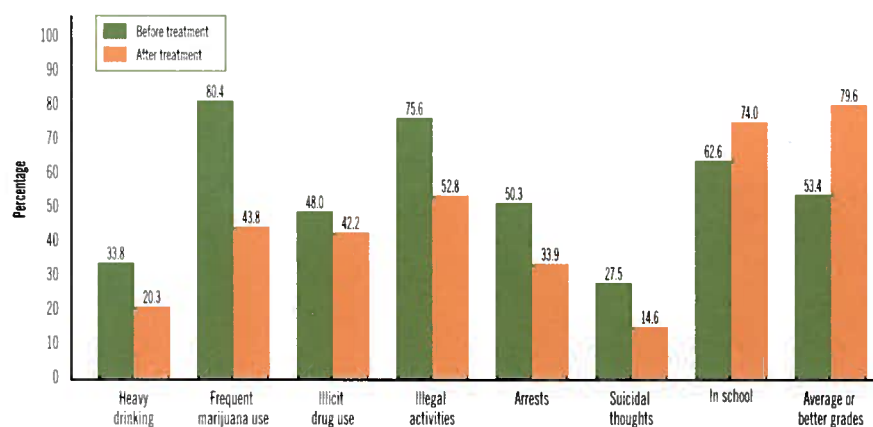
Several large-scale studies have shown that treatment for young people with alcohol and drug dependence is effective. The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) conducted a project titled, "Drug Abuse Treatment Outcome Studies for Adolescents" (DATOS-A).² Over 1,100 adolescents admitted to residential (3-12 months), outpatient (1-6 months), or short-term inpatient (5-35 days) programs were assessed at intake and one year after discharge.³ Twenty-three programs located in four U.S. cities were included.

Significant improvements were found at the one-year follow-up. Reductions in alcohol use, drug use, criminal activity, and suicidal thoughts were found (see Figure).³ In addition, more youth were attending school and reporting average or better grades in the year post-treatment compared to the year before.

Another large-scale study involved 485 adolescents admitted to residential therapeutic communities for alcohol/drug problems.⁴ Significant reductions in substance use, frequency of use, and criminal activity were found at the one-year follow-up.

In a study of Minnesota Model treatment programs for adolescents, Winters et al.⁵ also found substantial reductions in use in the year following treatment. Specifically, 54% and 44% of youth entering treatment had abstained or experienced only a minor relapse at six and twelve months, respectively.

DATOS-A results¹
Youth functioning in the year before and after treatment.



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THE HAZELDEN EXPERIENCE

Treatment outcome studies are underway at the Hazelden Center for Youth and Families (HCYF) in Plymouth, Minnesota. Alcohol and drug treatment services for young people include day treatment, residential primary treatment, extended care, and outpatient programs. Butler Center for Research staff is completing data analyses on five-year outcomes of youth treated at HCYF. In addition, Butler Center for Research staff is collaborating with researchers at the University of Minnesota to examine the impact of emotions on the course of recovery among substance dependent youth. This one-year outcomes study is currently in the data collection phase.

CONTROVERSIES & QUESTIONS

Question: What treatment works the best?

Response: Depending on individual needs, inpatient, residential, or outpatient programming may be appropriate for youth with substance dependence. Whatever type of program is deemed best, research data suggest the length of time in treatment is important. The longer a young person stays involved in treatment, the better the overall outcome.

Question: What about nicotine use?

Response: Youth continue to use nicotine at high rates following treatment for alcohol and other drug dependence.⁶ Although alcohol and illicit drug use is a targeted priority for intervention, health problems associated with smoking make this issue important to address in treatment and as part of a continuing care plan.

HOW TO USE THIS INFORMATION

- **Treatment Providers:** Work to enhance motivation among youth to complete treatment and attend Twelve Step groups after discharge. Educate youth about the "gateway" role of alcohol use in relapse on illicit drugs, and emphasize abstinence from all chemicals of abuse.
- **Parents:** Treatment can reduce your child's alcohol and drug use and improve academic, legal, and social functioning. Research suggests the longer your child stays involved in treatment, the better the outcome.
- **Policy:** Support efforts to increase insurance coverage for longer-term treatment for youth.

Treatment Outcomes Among Youth



Long-term outcome data are also available. Brown and colleagues⁶ assessed 162 youth at six months and one, two, and four years after discharge from an inpatient treatment program. At each follow-up, youth were asked about substance use in the preceding month. Substantial decreases in alcohol and drug use were observed in the four years after treatment, with the exception of nicotine. In addition, abstinence from alcohol and drugs was significantly associated with positive educational and occupational outcomes.

What Predicts Sustained Abstinence and Fewer Relapses?

Perhaps the most consistent factor associated with positive treatment outcomes among youth is treatment completion. In one study, youth who completed treatment were twice as likely to reduce alcohol and drug use in the year following treatment than were those who left treatment prematurely.⁴ Another study found 53% of treatment completers were abstinent or had a minor relapse at one-year follow-up compared to 15% of non-completers.⁵

Longer treatment stays have also been associated with positive outcomes. In the DATOS-A study, those who stayed in treatment longer (90+ days for residential and outpatient, 21+ days for inpatient) were 1.5 times more likely to be drug and alcohol free at one year posttreatment.⁷

Another factor related to positive outcomes among youth is Twelve Step meeting attendance (i.e. Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous). In their study of 99 youth, Kelly et al.⁷ found Twelve Step meeting attendance in the first three months after discharge from treatment predicted reduced substance use (independent of aftercare attendance), days in treatment, and pre-treatment levels of alcohol or drug use. The data suggest Twelve Step meeting attendance works by maintaining and increasing motivation for abstinence among young people.

Not surprisingly, avoiding alcohol is predictive of success after treatment. Youth rarely report alcohol as a drug of choice and may hold the mistaken belief that alcohol is less problematic than other drugs.⁸ Yet, recent research suggests the use of alcohol in the year after treatment acts as a "gateway" for relapse on illicit drugs among youth.⁸

Other factors associated with reduced alcohol and drug use in the year following treatment include higher pre-treatment use severity, positive relationships with treatment counselors, living outside the family home after discharge, and avoiding deviant peers.⁴

Summary

Youth alcohol and drug use drops substantially following treatment and educational, occupational, and social functioning improve. Treatment for young people with substance dependence is effective, allowing them to lead productive, meaningful lives.

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The Butler Center for Research informs and improves recovery services and produces research that benefits the field of addiction treatment. We are dedicated to conducting clinical research, collaborating with external researchers, and communicating scientific findings.

Valerie Slaymaker, Ph.D., Director

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